

Case Study

Springwire Helps Homeless Protect Vital, Personal Documents with Simple Scanning Solution



An aftershock of the recession that began in 2008 has been an increase in poverty and homelessness across America. Social service, civic and religious organizations struggle to keep up with the demands of helping a growing number of people with basic but essential needs, such as shelter, legal advice and job counseling.

Business Needs

Steve Albertson spends time trying to find solutions that can help meet those basic needs. Albertson is the Director of New Initiatives with Springwire, a Seattle-based national non-profit organization launched in the early 1990s to provide communication tools for people in crisis. Its first project was “Community Voice Mail,” a service to provide homeless people with a personal 10-digit voicemail so they can connect with potential employers, family and loved-ones.

Springwire, which now serves more than 50,000 people in 400 cities across the U.S., recognized another need among the homeless: in order to secure access to benefits and services, people who are homeless need a way to produce, manage and store personal documentation. Without a home, these important documents and possessions can easily be lost or destroyed, making it even more difficult for people in crisis to find help.

“I was reading a book on homeless women. Something that caught my attention is the fact that one of the last things these women hang onto is photos of people and places that are important to them, including family,” Albertson says. “When they lose their photos, it is absolutely wrenching.”

But it’s not just the photos of friends and family that are important. The homeless often carry other vital documents around with them in their pockets or backpacks, including birth certificates, Social Security cards, job applications, letters and business cards from important contacts.

“There’s a real need to safeguard these documents. Not only for people who are without a home, but for the social service agencies that are helping them. That help requires a lot of that paperwork,” Albertson says. “So we connected that with the fact that as much as 70 percent of the population we serve goes online frequently, typically at public libraries. And up to one-third of these people have cell phones and can use them to access online information. We thought, ‘Why don’t we digitize these documents so people can store them in a safe place online, where the documents are readily accessible when they need them?’”

Solution: Laptops and Fujitsu Scanners Deliver an Essential Service

Springwire wanted to offer the homeless a digital “home” for their vital and personal documents, and put out queries for assistance. It found a willing partner in Fujitsu, which supplied compact scanners to help the non-profit launch its Digital Documents initiative, created to offer participants a secure online location to scan, manage and store copies of important documents and photos.

Digital Documents launched in late 2012 with a pilot project in Seattle, Washington. Projects followed in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Vancouver, Washington, all promoted through announcements on Springwire’s Community Voice Mail service.

As part of the initiative, Springwire staff members bring laptops and Fujitsu ScanSnap scanners to central locations, including facilities run by other non-profit organizations, such as Catholic Community Services, and public locations used by the homeless, such as libraries. Participants can have their documents and pictures scanned as either PDF files or JPEG images, and then sent to a desktop folder on the laptop. From there, the document owners can move their digitized documents online, typically by sending as attachments to their free email services, such as Yahoo, Gmail, or Hotmail. Alternatively, some participants choose to store their files on removable flash drives.

To assuage any participants’ concerns about the security of their information, all of the laptop-based files are deleted using a high-security file-shredding software application – before the document owners leave.



Benefits: Easy Access, Centralized Storage for Individuals and the Agencies Serving Them

The Springwire effort is a seemingly simple solution that is already delivering benefits to individuals and social service agencies.

At a scanning session held in the central downtown branch of the Seattle Public Library, a woman named Renée peered intently as a Fujitsu ScanSnap S1500 pulled in a variety of photos and personal and official documents, including her birth certificate, and then sent the digitized files to the connected laptop. She had been carrying her important documents with her in a plastic Ziploc bag.

“I’ve always been afraid that my stuff would get lost or stolen or ruined by the rain,” she says after emailing the pictures and documents as attachments to her own Yahoo email account. “I found out about this service through my Community Voice Mail account. This is a real lifesaver for me. Now I can stop worrying about this stuff.”

Albertson says that while there has been some hesitation from individuals who want reassurances about security, once they see how simple the process is, and how easily they can access their documents, they convert. Social service agencies are also seeing the benefits of Digital Documents because it streamlines access to and centralizes the location of documents that are vital for benefits, employment and other services.

The reliability and usability of the Fujitsu scanners, which are now hauled around to many locations, is an important factor as well.

“I looked at a ton of scanners,” says Albertson. “The Fujitsu devices are the greatest thing in the world for this project. They all have a small footprint, they’re incredibly reliable, they can duplex and scan items like business cards, and they are really easy to use. We set up two profiles to simplify training for the people using them. When users are done scanning, a common reaction is, ‘That’s it?’ They are simple to use, and they just work.”

Springwire benefit snapshot:

- Simple process allows homeless to quickly, easily digitize important documents and photos
- Digital solution promises to help social service agencies and government organizations streamline assistance activities
- Fujitsu scanners provide compactness, reliability, and ease of use to handle the scanning needs of individuals



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